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JOHN MILTON

JOHN MILTON

THE
LARGE
AND
SMALL
POEMS
OF
JOHN MILTON
IN
TEN VOLUMES
WITH
A
GENERAL INDEX

BY
JOHN MILTON

JOHN MILTON

A PAPER
READ BEFORE THE
CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB
MONDAY EVENING
DECEMBER 7, 1908
IN CELEBRATION OF THE
TERCENTENARY
OF THE POET'S BIRTH

BY
CHARLES JOSEPH LITTLE

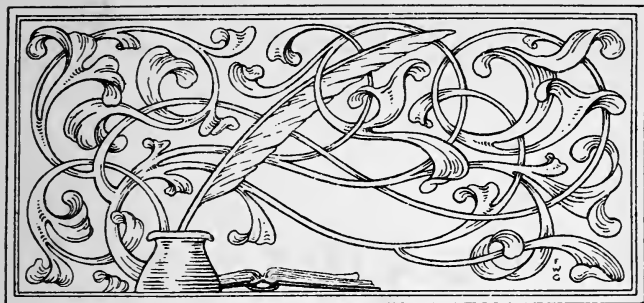


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JOHN MILTON

“ The work some praise,
And some the architect.”

These are Milton's words concerning
Mulciber,

“ Whose hand was known in Heaven
By many a towered structure high,
Where sceptred angels hold their residence.”

Suffer me to praise the architect and
only incidentally the work.

The first edition of Milton's minor poems appeared in 1645. The frontispiece was an engraved portrait of a morose and rather stupid-faced Englishman, whose long hair, parted in the middle, fell down on both sides to the high collar around the neck. Beneath the picture one could read in Latin, “John Milton, Englishman, in his twenty-first year”; and in Greek, four lines furnished to the engraver in jest by Milton himself. Roughly translated, the poet's mischief reads:

“That some uncunning hand this face had carved
Quickly you’d say, the living features seen,
But finding here no trait of me, my friends
Laugh at the bungling graver’s sorry botch.”

This was the beginning only of a fate that has pursued Milton down to our day. Marshall, the engraver, though, sinned without malice, while Samuel Johnson, most illustrious of Milton’s subsequent detractors, poured out upon the citizen a brew of falsehood and spleen which no praise of the poet could expiate. For the poet had committed that greatest of crimes: he had taken sides in an internecine political struggle, and taken, too, what seemed to Johnson and Hume and all the Tories of England and of Europe, the side of traitors and anarchists who had beheaded statesmen and bishops, and finally a king, and in their revolutionary frenzy enfeebled for all time the sacredness of hereditary privilege and the efficacy of consecrating oil.

To understand Milton we must begin here. He was known to most of his contemporaries, not as a poet, but as a writer of political pamphlets at a time when, as the publisher of these minor poems declared, “the slightest pamphlet was more vendible than the works of learnedest men.” Before this collection of poems was published, Milton’s tractates upon

reformation and episcopacy, the tractate upon divorce, and the *Areopagitica*, the speech for the liberty of unlicensed printing, had made their author notorious, rather than famous; he had provoked the wrath of Episcopalian and Presbyterian, of royalists and compromisers, in the days when ears were cropped and the headsman's axe was not unfrequently the final argument.

Not a few of his biographers declare with lofty self-complacency that Milton's pamphlets had scant influence upon the direction of events. This is true of all really great political writing; as true of Edmund Burke, of Wilhelm von Humboldt, of Francis Lieber, as it is of John Milton. For the really great political writer sees things from that ampler ether into which the lesser spirits never soar. His influence, moreover, asserts itself rather in the assent of the thinking few and in the resistance that he provokes from the interests he assails, than in the number of the admirers and adherents that he attracts. Milton was an independent of no narrow spirit, a Christian who belonged to no sect, a patriot who belonged to no party, a Puritan whose conscience reaffirmed the laws of God, often by defying the enactments and traditions of men. Independence like this can never become popular; and if supported

by unflinching courage and resplendent genius, it is sure to be decried, denounced, misrepresented, and maligned. That Milton never feared the face of man, these pamphlets amply prove. That his genius transcended that of his contemporaries, Hobbes, Selden, Sir Thomas Browne, Jeremy Taylor, to mention the immortals only, leaps to the mind of every intelligent reader of the *Areopagitica*. That he possessed the prophetic quality which is the very eye of inspiration, three succeeding centuries have attested, for the principles that Milton championed and defended, even the principle that penetrates and redeems his treatises upon divorce, have become the common-places of our modern political and social creeds. Who believes to-day either in the divine right of kings, as held by Laud the bishop, or in the hereditary inalienability of a kingly crown, as held afterward by Blackstone the lawyer? Who now refuses sanction to Milton's noble contention that a true marriage must be something finer and diviner than a union of two bodies, that it must be a harmony of souls attuned to a concord of thought and purpose, a companionship of sorrow mitigated by love and of delights intensified by mutual participation?

Who does not share with Milton the desire and hope for that nobler ministry of

truth from which the hirelings shall be driven by the lash of public scorn? and who, whatever be his belief or disbelief, does not thrill at Milton's picture of the coming of "the King who shall put an end to all earthly tyrannies, proclaiming his universal and mild monarchy through heaven and earth; where they that by their labours, counsels, and prayers have been in earnest for the common good of religion and their country shall in superabundance of beatific vision progressing the dateless and irrevolvable circle of eternity, clasp inseparable hands with joy and bliss, in over-measure forever?"

Who would reinstate the censor now? But if it were attempted, what better arguments to defeat it than those of Milton? "As good almost kill a man as kill a good book; who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but he who destroys a good book kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were, in the eye. Many a man lives a burden to the earth; but a good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life." "Though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to prey upon the earth, so truth be in the field, we do injuriously by licensing and prohibiting to misdoubt her strength. Let her and falsehood grapple; who ever knew truth

put to the worse on a free and open encounter? Who knows not that truth is strong next to the Almighty; she needs no policies, nor stratagems nor licensings, to make her victorious; those are the shifts and defenses that error uses against her power: give her but room and do not bind her when she sleeps, for then she speaks not true, as the old Proteus did who spake oracles only when he was caught and bound, but then rather she turns herself into all shapes except her own, and tunes her voice according to the time.”

The speech for the liberty of unlicensed printing appeared in 1644, while the first edition of his minor poems was in press. But, as his publisher complained, the people were in no mood for literature, least of all for poetry like *L’Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, or even for a work of perfect art like *Comus*. Strafford had gone to the block, and Laud’s head was unsteady on his shoulders; King Charles was nearing the battle-field of Naseby and the scaffold; an assembly of divines, meeting in the Jerusalem chamber at Westminster, were drawing up a confession of faith which might serve as an iron-clad test to separate the band of Gideon from Jehovah’s enemies; sects were multiplying with diabolical rapidity, sixteen of them flourishing in defiance of the law. “We detest and abhor the

much endeavored toleration," wrote the London clergy. "Parliament will graciously suppress all sects without toleration," petitioned the corporation of the city. Milton had already noted with his yet unblinded eyes that "New Presbyter was only old priest writ large," while Cromwell had uttered his noble and mighty words, "He that ventures his life for the liberty of his country, I wish he would trust God for the liberty of his conscience." "From brethren in things of the mind we look for no compulsion but that of light and reason."

Our self-complacent aftersight enables us to see, now when three centuries have elapsed, that Milton the poet soars far above the pamphleteer; accordingly, with solemn arrogance we summon him to judgment for wasting his genius in controversy, deploring the loss of certain never-written poems. This vaunted aftersight is blind misunderstanding. Let us listen to the man himself! "As for the other points, what God may have determined for me I know not; but this I know, that if He ever instilled an intense love of moral beauty into the breast of any man, He has instilled it into mine: Ceres, in the fable, pursued not her daughter with a greater keenness of inquiry than I, day and night, the idea of perfection. Hence, whenever I find a man despising the false estimates of the vulgar, and daring

to aspire, in sentiment, language, and conduct, to what the highest wisdom through every age has taught us as most excellent, to him I unite myself by a sort of necessary attachment; and if I am so influenced by nature or destiny that by no exertion or labours of my own I may exalt myself to this summit of worth and honour, yet no powers of heaven or earth will hinder me from looking with reverence and affection upon those who have thoroughly attained this glory, or appear in the successful pursuit of it. You inquire with a kind of solicitude even into my thoughts. Hear, then, Diodati, but let me whisper in your ear, that I may not blush at my reply—I think (so help me Heaven!) of immortality. You inquire, also, what I am about? I nurse my wings, and meditate a flight; but my Pegasus rises as yet on very tender pinions. Let us be humbly wise.”

He thinks of immortality! And yet he accepts in early manhood “the lot however mean or high towards which Time leads him and the will of Heaven. All is, if he has grace to use it so, as ever in his great Taskmaster’s eye.” “For he was confirmed in this opinion, that he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem.” A believer in the majesty of man’s free will, he was a believer, too, in

that eternal spirit “who can enrich with all utterance and knowledge, and sends out His seraphim, with the hallowed fire of His altar, to touch and purify the lips of whom he pleases: to this must be added industrious and select reading, steady observation, insight into all seemly and generous arts and affairs.” Observation and insight he sought in Italy, and would have sought in Greece. But “the melancholy intelligence,” he tells us, “which I received of the civil commotions in England made me alter my purpose; for I thought it base to be traveling for amusement abroad while my fellow-citizens were fighting for liberty at home.” He had no love for controversy, especially in an age of brutal recrimination and barbarous cruelty; in fact, he hated it for its own sake and for the abuse and slander that it would surely bring upon him.

Listen again: “For, surely, to every good and peaceable man, it must in nature needs be a hateful thing to be the displeaser and molester of thousands; much better would it please him, undoubtedly, to be the messenger of gladness and contentment, which is his chief intended business to all mankind, but that they resist and oppose their own true happiness. But when God commands to take the trumpet and blow a dolorous and jarring blast, it lies not in

man's will what he shall conceal." "Which might teach these times not suddenly to condemn all things that are sharply spoken or vehemently written, as proceeding out of stomach, virulence, or ill-nature."

"No man can be justly offended with him that shall endeavour to impart or bestow without any gain to himself, those sharp and saving words which would be a terror and a torment in him to keep back. For me, I have determined to lay up, as the best treasure and solace of a good old age, if God vouchsafe it me, the honest liberty of free speech from my youth, when I shall think it available in so dear a concernment as the church's good." Moreover, he imagined his Master saying, "When time was, thou couldst not find a syllable of all thou hast read or studied to utter in my behalf? Yet ease and leisure was given thee for thy retired thoughts out of the sweat of other men. Thou hast the diligence, the parts, the language of a man, if a vain subject were to be adorned or beautified; but when the cause of God and His Church was to be pleaded, for which purpose that tongue was given thee which thou hast, God listened if He could hear thy voice among his zealous servants, but thou wert dumb as a beast; from henceforward be that which thine own brutish silence hath made thee." This believer in immortality

feared to be punished "in the shape he sinned," with everlasting "brutish silence."

His prose inferior to his poetry? Who knew this better than Milton? Who declared in the very moment of self-immolation: "This manner of writing, wherein knowing myself inferior to myself, led by the genial power of nature to another task, I have the use, as I may account, but of my left hand."

Many in these later centuries have sympathized with Milton in his blindness; all the more because he lost his sight in the service of his country, writing the defense of the English people. But the left-handed Milton is no less a patriot than the sightless bard listening to Archangel ruined, or to the harpings and hallelujahs of the angels that renew their strength in glimpses of God's face. Nay, the sacrifice was even greater. It consumed the best years of his life; he was thirty-three when he wrote the first, and fifty-two when he wrote the last, of his controversial pamphlets. They cost him his eyes and the use for two decades of the wonderful right hand that wrote the *Paradise Lost* and the *Samson Agonistes*. Does the history of poetry or the history of patriotism anywhere record a nobler sacrifice? Milton was neither poor nor greedy; he was rich enough to

write poems at his leisure; like Socrates, his wants were few. He was never physically strong; there was no guarantee, human or divine, that he would escape captivity or the scaffold, or live to old age. Yet he placed upon the altar of English liberty all the poems teeming in his prolific brain, all the thoughts that wandered through eternity. But God, who in the ancient story at once inspired and refused the sacrifice of Abraham's child of promise, the God of Milton, gave back to him and to literature the offered song, the guerdon of his unshaken faith, and the poem lost in the turmoil of the revolution was regained amid the revels and the persecutions of the Restoration. As the Stuarts remounted for a brief space the throne of England, to cover the stains of their father's blood with darker stains of immorality and cruelty then Milton soared serenely to the throne of the immortals, to sit down with Homer and Lucretius and Dante and Spenser, not the least of that illustrious company who brighten with celestial splendor and soften with celestial melodies "the smoke and stir of this dim spot that men call earth."

Misread him not, however. His was no unpremeditated sacrifice, made in ignorance of consequences. It is Milton's glory that he counted the cost correctly, even to the slanders that would be heaped upon him,

and that he paid it notwithstanding. He knew his age and its favorite methods of reply, the prison and the pillory, and when these were not possible, abusive lies and slanders. Here is an early specimen. "Of late, since he was out of wit and clothes, he is now clothed in serge and confined to a parlour, where he blasphemes God and the king as ordinarily erstwhile he drank sack and swore. Hear him speak! Christian, dost thou like these passages? Or doth thy heart rise against such unseemly beastliness? Nay, but take this head . . . Horrid blasphemy! You that love Christ, and know this miscreant wretch, stone him to death, lest yourselves smart for his impunity."

True, we owe to this abuse those radiant bits of autobiography, imbedded like jewels in the controversial pamphlets. Milton never skulked, as many do even in our time, behind the plea that a man's character has nothing to do with his opinions. For Milton, a man's bad character discredited his opinions, especially where moral issues were involved. Skilled musician as he was, he would have scoffed at those who, albeit music-deaf, chatter glibly of the concord of sweet sounds. Apostates from liberty, tyrants and sycophants, hirelings and bribe-takers, he believed, were not inspired to instruct free Englishmen in civil

or religious duty. To unmask them was, therefore, to refute them. If he himself were such, he had no duty, nay, not even the right to speak. Therefore he replied to his slanderers with noble self-revelation, an example followed in our day by John Henry Newman in his powerful and successful *Apologia*.

And what manner of man did he reveal? The loving son of a very noble father, himself an outcast from the paternal home for his opinion's sake. Trained to knowledge and music and independence by this same father, who had acquired wealth by intelligence and industry, and sent by him to Cambridge that he might prepare to serve the Church.

A Puritan in his youth, but not of the kind sculptured by Saint Gaudens, or even of the Cromwell kind, but one that loved Shakespeare and adored Spenser, who delighted in music and in the friendship of noble souls, whose strength was as the strength of ten because his heart was pure. A shallow critic of Milton's Comus declares that Milton could not draw ugliness: "It turns into beauty or majesty in his hands." He could draw it easily enough, but never with love, always with loathing. Comus, like Satan, the Serpent, tempts chastity with beauty, and only at that entrance was Milton himself exposed to evil. Ugly

wickedness repelled him; meanness and cowardice enraged him. A born poet, he was also a born artist; like Dante, taking infinite pains to acquire technical perfection. Like Galileo and Pascal, rebelling at the pedants who controlled the learning of his time, he was none the less a student, whose prodigious memory was the ready servant of a puissant and far-ranging intelligence. Not tall, but lithe and erect; his slender frame carrying a shapely head crowned with light brown hair, which clustered about an oval face beautiful in form and color, and luminous dark-gray glittering eyes whose glitter changed to glow when thoughts were surging in his brain or feeling rising in his heart. A sweet and tuneful voice made his speech and song attractive, while a playful irony blended with a serious cheerfulness to brighten all his talk. After fourteen years of preparation for it and witness of its administration, he refused to enter the Church. "He who would take orders must subscribe himself slave and take an oath withal." God's servant he would be most willingly, and man's too, for that matter. But long before the German poet Arndt had written it, Milton felt that God who made the iron grow in the hillsides had little love for slaves. His noble father, one of the noblest in human annals, although reluctant,

yielded to the scruples of his beloved son, who spent six years more in quiet study and fifteen months in foreign travel. The lad who had criticised the University pedants made friends in Paris with Hugo Grotius and in Italy with the wisest Italians of that gloomy period. Even where Galileo then languished a prisoner, Milton would not hold his peace when his religious views were called in question. Indeed, his interview with the "Tuscan artist," the sightless victim of ecclesiastical tyranny, made him the more eager to preserve the envied liberty of England from the reign of "thorough," begun by Laud and Strafford, and supported by King Charles and his intriguing queen.

Galileo was then in his seventy-fifth year, old, blind, bereft of his beloved daughter, yet indomitably determined to defy his persecutors with the last and greatest of his dialogues, that upon the New Sciences.

Did the young poet, rejoicing in the vigor of early manhood, have some foreboding of his own destiny as he looked upon those rugged features and talked with the sightless "Columbus of the skies?" Did he feel the darkness gathering about his own head, and the prison walls enclosing him, and see in the ministries of Galileo's pupils the one remaining comfort of his own last days? Galileo had two daughters,

one of whom was sour, peevish, morose, and selfish, the other a ministering angel while she lived, and more than ministering angel: a companion for her father's mind, the greatest then blazing in all earth's galaxy; but a companion taken from him all too soon, though still "calling to him continually." Milton was to have three daughters, of whom one only should be any comfort to him, and she rather in love and good intention than in intellectual sympathy. Did Milton hear from Galileo's own lips the story of that strange retraction, not yet wholly free from mystery, and did he swear on hearing it never to fling a stone at the wonderful old man, who was even then redeeming his defeat and revenging his humiliation by the defiant publication of the principles that underlie our modern dynamics, and now flash their splendor to us from every triumph of modern engineering? I never read Milton's allusions to Galileo in his prose and in his poetry without a vision of that meeting: the last of the giants of the older Italy, the herald of an intellectual method that was to change the face of the world and transform the reasoning of mankind; and the last of the Elizabethan poets, the one born out of due time, as he himself declared, but destined to compose a poem of enduring sublimity, and to live a poem of heroic and thrilling majesty.

Perhaps the noblest passage in Schiller's Don Carlos is that in which the Queen begs Posa to tell the Prince to reverence the ideals of his youth. Ah me! How few of us attain to it. In the dire struggle for existence, in the rush of competition, tempted by avarice or ambition or the pride of life, weakened by strife or by the persuasions of timid friends, the ideals that charmed us in the golden dawn fade away like the splendors of the morning, returning at dusk only as reminders of what we might have been.

John Milton stands forever in the history of English politics and of English literature as a man who revered in mature manhood and in age the ideals of his youth, "never 'bating jot of heart of hope, but steering right onward." I shall not defend him from the charges made against him, some—and the most—of which are false and foolish, and many of which betray a signal ignorance of his writings, of his history, and of the age and the England in which he lived. In Italy he might have written a masterpiece of controversy like Galileo's *Saggiatore*; in France he might have written letters like Pascal's *Provincials*; in England he used the club of Hercules, not the stiletto of the Italian master, or like the wonderful French genius, the shafts of merciless ridicule and the flaming sword of an angry archangel.

True to his ideals, he looked with foreboding at Cromwell's encroachments upon liberty, warning whilst praising him, and he closed his defense of the people of England with these courageous words: "If, as you have been valiant in war, you should grow debauched in peace, you that have had such visible demonstrations of the goodness of God to yourselves and of his wrath to your enemies; if it should fall out that you have not learned by so ancient an example before your eyes to fear God and work righteousness;— then for my part I shall easily grant and confess (for I cannot deny it) whatever ill man may speak or think of you to be very true. And you will find in a little time that God's displeasure against you will be greater than it has been against your adversaries, greater than his grace and favour have been to yourselves, which you have had larger experience of than any other nation under heaven." "Milton, thou shouldst be living at this hour," and writing for America!

"No one," wrote Milton, "ever saw me going about, no one ever saw me asking anything among my friends, or stationed at the doors of the court with a petitioner's face or haunting the entries of lesser assemblies. I kept myself entirely at home, contriving, though burdened with

taxes in the main rather oppressive, to lead my frugal life, when lo! Charles' kingdom having been formed into a republic, the Council of State invited me, dreaming of nothing of the sort, to give the use of my services chiefly in foreign affairs." Thus he became Latin Secretary in the new republic, an office which, if not conferred by Cromwell, brought his future panegyrist and intrepid counsellor into close relations with him. But the man that sacrificed his eyes to defend the people of England was not the man to sacrifice his conscience to any ruler, however powerful. Much as he admired the Protector, he feared and foreboded the downfall of a republic so dependent upon a single overmastering mind. His fears and forebodings soon turned to facts. There were, upon Cromwell's death, among England's five millions; not men enough to save it from the returning Stuarts. Puritanism, as Milton foresaw and foretold, had made itself hateful by political and social tyranny; even Cromwell came to see before his death that Puritanism "had missed its aim." Intellectual forces abounded; they were soon to appear, not so much in poets like Butler and Dryden, or in statesmen like Clarendon, but in the Royal Society, and afterwards in Isaac Newton. Bacon's skepticism, amplified and emboldened, would assert itself in

Thomas Hobbes, his favorite secretary, and theology was to give place to the New Philosophy, "which from the times of Galileo at Florence and Sir Francis Bacon in England hath been much cultivated in Italy, France, Germany, and other parts abroad, as well as in England." Meanwhile men like Hales and Chillingworth were seeing that the Church of England might possibly be saved by mitigating and simplifying its doctrine, and by a noble comprehension of all who lived a righteous life, thus hoping vainly (as the sequel proved) to gain by tolerance and reason what Milton had vainly hoped to gain by independence. But in one of those spasms which sweep over a nation, all hope of moderation perished. The corpse of Cromwell was torn from its grave and gibbeted at Tyburn; that of Pym cast out of Westminster Abbey; Howe and Baxter, the ablest preacher and that noblest parish priest in England were driven from their churches; John Bunyan was sent to Bedford jail while John Milton was imprisoned and impoverished. His sight was gone, but his spirit was unbroken. True, he had yielded to the urging of his friends and gone into hiding when his enemies were hoping to see him carried to Tyburn in a cart. Mr. Masson declares quite truly that there is no greater historical puzzle than the complete escape

of Milton from the scaffold after the Restoration. "It was thought a strange omission," wrote Burnet. But to Milton it was no puzzle; it was an act of God, in whom he had put his trust, and who would not see him put to shame. But whither to go and what to do? Home he hardly possessed, for his beloved second wife was dead, and the only one of his three daughters that loved the blind father, the youngest, Deborah, was but nine years old. His great Taskmaster, however, had work for which he had saved him. Already, in 1658, Milton had begun the elaboration of the great poem which he had laid aside when duty called him to sacrifice his strong right arm. He now regained its use. A feeble soul would have succumbed in such surroundings. Evil indeed were the times; his friends dragged to prison or the scaffold; the causes for which he had made his sacrifices lost apparently forever; his old antagonist, the hypocrite Morus, preaching in London to the King and his courtiers; all the scum of literary England floating to the surface! What an hour for such an undertaking! His "late espoused saint" coming to him in dreams only; his oldest daughters stealing and selling his books to gratify their whims; and his little Deborah trying in vain to keep pace with her great father's rapid mental stride so as to read

to him his books of divers tongues. Then,
to use his own words,

“ Though blind of sight,
Despised, and thought extinguished quite,
With inward eyes illuminated,
His fiery virtue roused
From under ashes into sudden flame, he like an eagle
His cloudless thunder bolted on their heads.
So virtue given for lost,
Depressed and overthrown, as seemed,
Revives, reflourishes, then vigorous most
When most unactive deemed,
And though her body dies, her fame survives.”

Robert Louis Stevenson remarked jauntily that we cannot all enjoy *Paradise Lost*. He meant to say that we cannot all or any of us enjoy all of it, any more than we can enjoy all of Dante's *Commedia*, or all of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, or all of Browning's *Ring and the Book*. Poe was nearer right when he contended that every long poem is really a cluster of short ones, *Paradise Lost* being the chief example.

Let me consider three points only, points that have to do with Milton's character. First, the frequent objection that Satan is the hero of the poem. Of course he is. Why not? The essence of tragedy, as every great dramatist from *Æschylus* to *Ibsen* has perceived, lies in wrong-doing, the righteous sufferers being victims always of another's unrighteousness, whether, as in *Prometheus Bound*, the wrong-doer be *Zeus*

himself, or, as in the *Agamemnon*, all are wrong in different degree. Now, Milton at first intended to compose a tragedy. The ancient story and his own defect of dramatic power made that seem unwise. But the tragic elements in the story of the fall of Lucifer and of Adam filled his mind; the study of Shakespeare, especially of the characters of Wolsey and of Lady Macbeth, had revealed to him quite early the havoc wrought in great natures by ambition; while the career of his great contemporary Strafford had shown him a colossal character ruined by greed and pride, and wanton use of giant strength. Wolsey's "Cromwell, I charge thee fling away ambition, by that sin fell the angels," might be taken as his text.

Wolsey's wail, "If I had served my God with half the zeal I served my king, he would not in mine age have left me naked to mine enemies," made Milton doubt his other saying that when he fell "he fell like Lucifer." Strafford, however, whose trial Milton must have followed spell-bound,—Strafford, indeed, resembled an archangel ruined, witness his fascination for every historian of that momentous period. Not Pym, not Hampden, not even Cromwell, stirs us as does the haughty, brilliant, mentally massive, upward-climbing Wentworth, struggling in heroic splen-

dor to avert his doom. I never recall the famous passage,

“Thrice he essayed, and thrice in spite of scorn.
Tears such as Angels weep burst forth,”

without a vision of Strafford in the presence of his judges, he, too, in spite of scorn, helpless to check the gushing tears that wet his iron cheeks. Precisely here lay all the tragedy to Milton, that men like Wolsey and Bacon and Strafford should rank with the apostates. His scorn for Belial and for Mammon, the one “who seemed composed for dignity and high exploit, though all was false and hollow,” the other expecting to find even in the desert-soil of hell gems and gold, and expecting to exercise angelic skill and art in raising even there magnificence;—Milton’s scorn for both of them gleams and stabs like lightning in the words of Beelzebub, “than whom, Satan except, none higher sate; who stood with Atlantean shoulders fit to bear the weight of mightiest monarchies.” Milton felt his own kinship with these colossal spirits, together with his abhorrence at their apostasy. That weaklings should go wrong in great affairs matters little; but when giants waste their strength against the eternal laws, and thereby involve the living and the yet unborn in misery, then these laws of God must be followed to their final con-

sequence, never even in Holy Writ more terribly depicted than in those words of Satan, whose accompanying shudder trembles through all the regions of despair:

“ Whither I go is hell ; myself am hell ! ”

We moderns chuckle fondly as ghosts and devils and the damned fade from the imagination—as though there vanished with them the decrees of God—and so we fail to read aright our works of genius. The grim button-moulder of the Norwegian dramatist makes us shiver for a moment only with his threat to throw us to the scrap pile, but the merry mood succeeds him soon. Accordingly on every side of us we see colossal powers wasted in daring yet unworthy and diabolical enterprises, and in competition for that bad eminence which ends inevitably in the devastation of all that makes men and angels sons of God.

Again, it is this hatred of evil that discolours Milton's image of the deity. To be sure, the harsher features of the medieval theology had not been softened in the bitter doctrinal conflicts of the seventeenth century, while the framework chosen by the poet for his epic, the story of the fall, compelled him to attempt the impossible and miss. For in his treatise upon Christian Doctrine, he declared that to the finite mind God must be forever incomprehen-

sible. But there was in Milton none of that jaunty, jesting, sympathy with the incorrigible wrong-doer that inspired Burns in his farewell to Auld Nickie Ben, and made him "wae to think upon yon den e'en for his sake." Milton, on the contrary, was glad to think upon "yon den"; and his joy seemed to him but a drop from the overflow of God's delight in the condign punishment of evil-doers.

Nothing in Dante's *Inferno* is more terrible than the picture of Satan returning triumphantly from Eden and standing expectant of the universal shout and high applause to fill his ear; when contrary, he hears on all sides from innumerable tongues a dismal universal hiss, the sound of public scorn.

"His arms clung to his ribs, his legs intertwining
Each other, till supplanted down he fell
A monstrous serpent on his belly prone,
Reluctant, but in vain, a greater power
Now rul'd him, punish'd in the shape he sinn'd.
According to his doom; he would have spoke,
But hiss for hiss return'd with forked tongue
To forked tongue, for now were all transform'd
Alike, to serpents all as accessories
To his bold riot."

"Punish'd in the shape he sinn'd!"
There was the lesson learned from Dante.
And the power displayed in the description
is no greater than the poet's exultation,
which he believes himself to share with
God and all his loyal angels.

And yet, our milder conceptions of deity have given us nothing lovelier, and nothing wiser, than the words of Adam persuading Eve to penitence :

“ He will instruct us praying, and of grace
Beseeching him . . .

What better can we do, than to the place
Repairing where he judg'd us, prostrate fall
Before him reverent, and there confess
Humbly our faults, and pardon beg, with tears

Undoubtedly he will relent and turn
From his displeasure; in whose look serene,
When angry most he seem'd, and most severe,
What else but favour, grace, and mercy shone? ”

Or have these milder conceptions given us anything nobler than the lament of Adam for the lost epiphanies of God and the benignant reply of the Archangel so sweet with truth and comfort ?

“ On this mount he appear'd, under this tree
Stood visible, among these pines his voice
I heard, here with him at this fountain talk'd.”

This is the voice of humanity yearning for the great companion ; the voice of Schiller lamenting the vanished gods of Greece, the voice of Musset crying in the October night for God to bow the heavens and come down, the voice of Leopardi scanning in vain the Orient sky for tokens of His presence, the voice of Wordsworth complaining :

“ Great God! I ’d rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea,
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.”

But what says Michael, with regard
benign?

“ Adam, thou know’st heav’n His, and all the earth,
Not this rock only; His omnipresence fills
Land, sea, and air, and every kind that lives,
Fomented by His virtual pow’r and warm’d:

Yet doubt not but in valley and in plain
God is as here, and will be found alike
Present, and of His presence many a sign
Still following thee, still compassing thee round
With goodness and paternal love.”

And finally, how innane are the gibes so often flung at the converse of Adam and Eve in Paradise. For the nobler gentlewomen of the seventeenth century that Milton knew, English and Italian alike, spoke a language far more stately than that of our fluent and often flippant dames and maidens. Even Romeo and Juliet hardly talked like modern sweethearts. How, in sooth, were the parents of all the living to address each other? Was Adam to greet Eve with some such song as Herrick’s Cherry Ripe?

“ Cherry ripe, ripe, ripe, I cry.
If so be you ask me where
They do grow, I answer, there

Where my Eva's lips doe smile,
There's the land or cherry isle
Whose plantations fully show
All the year where cherries grow."

And was Eve to reply, as Dryden made her reply in his never-acted opera, the *State of Innocence*, in which he "tagged Milton's verses" and sullied them with an impure fancy? Shall we chide the poet who made the mother of all the living speak with the gracious dignity of Vittoria Colonna, or of Margaret Roper, the charming child of Sir Thomas More? Were our first parents in their innocence to indulge in raptures of self-abandon rather than to face each other in the joy of chaste surprise?

Consider the stupendous difficulty of Milton's task. An adult pair with no experience of childhood; without society except each other; with naught to talk about until they fell, except the flowers and the fruits, and the creatures of the garden, and the aspects of earth and sky, and the walks and talks with their creator. Milton could not pour the riches of his vast and varied knowledge into their speech; he shows his power by its utter absence. He would have made their conversation ludicrous and himself a laughing-stock by freighting it with anachronisms and allusions to things beyond their ken.

Nor are the critics either very subtle or

very profound who discover in these scenes the persistent shadow of Mary Powell, Milton's truant wife, and his supposed notions of woman's inferiority. Indeed, Milton's conception of the conjugal relation here illustrated is nobler than any to be found, not merely in contemporary English, but in contemporary European literature. How mean is the Adam of the Bible story! How tame and cowardly are his recorded words! "The woman thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat." But Milton endows Adam with his own fine courage, and a self-sacrifice that verges towards the sublime. Adam disobeys, indeed, but disobeys, not for knowledge: he disobeys for love!

“ With thee
Certain my resolution is to die ;
How can I live without thee, how forego
Thy sweet converse and love so dearly join'd,
To live again in these wild woods forlorn ?
Should God create another Eve,
. . . yet loss of thee
Would never from my heart: No ! No ! I feel
The link of nature draw me : flesh of flesh,
Bone of my bone thou art, and from thy state
Mine never shall be parted, bliss or woe.”

The notion that the wife should be the husband's slave, so universal in the seventeenth century, has by no means disappeared in the twentieth. But Milton, rejecting the absurd belief that every woman is inferior to any man, boldly

affirmed that whenever the wife proved superior, she ought to bear rule according to the law of nature that subjects the lower to the higher being. No! Eve is not the illustration of a thesis; to be depicted at all she must be depicted within the limit of the ancient story. Neither is she Mary Powell. Happy indeed had Milton been, if Mary Powell had been another Eve, for then she would have inspired in him a love like that which triumphed in the Garden. Then, like Adam, he might have found in her that which

“Argued in her something more sublime
And excellent than what her mind contemned.”

Unfortunately for him, there was in his first wife no such fathomless depth of affection as Eve disclosed when about to leave the places that she loved.

“But now lead me on;
In me is no delay; with thee to go
Is to stay here; without thee here to stay
Is to go hence unwilling; thou to me
Art all things under Heaven, all places thou
Who for my wilful crime art banished hence.”

Nor was it any recollection of Mary Powell that inspired the picture of love triumphant amid the havoc of wrong-doing, so touching in its quiet beauty, with which the poem closes.

“Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped
 them soon;
The world was all before them, where to choose

Their place of rest, and Providence their guide,
They hand in hand, with wandering steps and
slow
Through Eden took their solitary way."

Do you remember the music of the eighth book's opening lines?

"The angel ended, and in Adam's ear
So charming left his voice, that he awhile
Thought him still speaking, still stood fix'd to hear."

Dryden, Addison, Wordsworth, thought Milton still speaking, and each of them stood fixed to hear.

"Milton, thou shouldst be living at this hour!" was Wordsworth's invocation, and it befits every time that needs a voice whose sound is like the sea that can be heard afar. If, then, I have chosen to write rather of the architect than of his work, it is because Milton stood for every ideal that we in America are called to realize. He stood for a republic, in which the wisest and best should rule; he stood for a free church in a free state, for sane and rapid methods of education, for unchecked research and liberty of speech, for pure literature and noble art, for the people and not for irresponsible rulers or privileged classes, for the laws of God to which all constitutions and statutes must conform, for sublimity of life, for righteousness of conduct, for that universal and mild monarchy that shall put an end to every earthly tyranny. For these he stood, for these he fought undauntedly,

and at the last alone. "I was ever a fighter," sings Mr. Browning. Grant it freely. But when I contrast the blind Samson of the Revolution and the Restoration with the elegant poet of the Victorian age, I cannot be altogether deaf to a touch of brag in Browning's words. That strong right arm of John Milton held useless behind his back while with the left he fights his battles, those beautiful but sightless eyes, all "knowledge at one entrance quite shut out,"—they are the marks of the greatest literary fighter in English history, a fighter never more wonderful and never more triumphant than when he organized his mightiest victory, his immortal poem, from the wreck of a republic and the ruin of his hopes.



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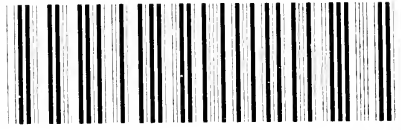
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